

Statement of
Congresswoman Mazie K. Hirono
House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing, and Trade
Hearing
“Where the Jobs Are: Promoting Tourism to America”
Wednesday, May 16, 2012

Chairwoman Bono-Mack, Ranking Member Butterfield, thank you for allowing me to participate in today’s hearing.

Creating good jobs is a national priority. One of the strongest job creating sectors is America’s visitor industry.

The travel and tourism industry is critically important to my home state of Hawaii. It is also important to many other states—including Chairwoman Bono-Mack’s. In fact, nearly 900,000 people in California have jobs in this industry.

Tourism is Hawaii’s biggest economic driver, accounting for 17.4 percent of the jobs in Hawaii. It also accounts for almost 20 percent of our economy. That’s over 145,000 jobs and \$12.6 billion in 2011.

Nationally, tourism has been one of our nation’s biggest exports for years. In 2011, it supported 7.6 million jobs and generated 3.5 percent of our GDP. That’s 1.2 trillion dollars.

The National Travel and Tourism Strategy released last week recognizes the industry’s importance to our nation’s economy. It sets a bold goal of attracting 100 million international visitors by 2021.

I applaud Secretaries’ Bryson and Salazar, and all the Task Force members, for their work on this plan. And I commend President Obama for recognizing—and prioritizing—travel and tourism as a way to create jobs. The goal set by the President will take a serious effort.

Last year, the U.S. welcomed 62 million visitors from abroad. This was a record number. So increasing that number to 100 million in the next nine years will be a challenge. It’s a challenge I hope we can meet in a bipartisan way.

In 2010 Congress passed the Travel Promotion Act. That law created BrandUSA, which just launched its first campaign to promote America abroad.

Last year we passed the Federal Aviation Administration Reauthorization. This law makes a four year investment in our aviation systems, especially NextGen. The Tourism Strategy calls for these investments in a 21st century air traffic control system.

So we are making progress.

I know the Administration has also worked to tackle visa processing backlogs. For example, they have increased staffing in places like China and Brazil. China is a key market—both for Hawaii and the U.S.

Over 54 million Chinese travelled abroad in 2010. Last year, less than 1 million of them came to the U.S and only 62,000 came to Hawaii.

In September of 2011, Hawaii hosted the 5th annual China-U.S. Tourism Leadership Summit. At the Summit, Mr. Qiwei Shao, China's highest ranking tourism official said:

“We hope that the U.S. can bring more convenient visa procedures, and we exchanged views on this.”

He went on to say, “The goal in 2015 is for tourist flows between China and the U.S. to reach 5 million.”

We are missing the boat on this growing China market, but we can do something about it quickly. Congress can act to cut red tape and streamline the visa process for visitors from China and other growing markets.

That's why I introduced the bipartisan VISIT USA Act with Representative David Dreier. Our bill would make common-sense changes to our visa processes. These changes would expedite visa processing to increase visitors while preserving U.S. security. It would also focus on high growth markets like China, Brazil, and India.

Briefly, some of the bills key points are:

- Granting Chinese visitors five year, rather than one year, multiple entry visas
- Conducting interviews by secure videoconference rather than requiring the Chinese to travel great distances to one of only five permanent consulates in their country.

- Establishing mobile satellite consulates in cities of one million or more.
- Increasing or decreasing fees based on seasonal demand.
- Allowing expedited visa reviewing.

These common-sense reforms, among others included in the bill, will help to implement the National Travel and Tourism Strategy.

This bill has a bipartisan companion in the Senate, and has been endorsed by a broad range of groups—From UNITE-HERE to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to Americans for Tax Reform. And the U.S. Travel Association who we will be hearing from later today.

Boosting our travel and tourism industry will help our economy. And helping our economy should be a bipartisan issue.

I'm glad to have bipartisan cosponsors, including Representatives Dreier, Berkley, Blumenauer, Farr, Hanabusa, and Hultgren. I hope more of my colleagues will consider cosponsoring my bill.

I look forward to working with all of you to advance the National Travel and Tourism Strategy and create more jobs.

Thank you.